



Horizons of History: Space, Time and the Future of the Past

Citation

Armitage, David. 2015. Horizons of History: Space, Time, and the Future of the Past. History Australia no 12(1): 207-25.

Published Version

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14490854.2015.11668560>

Permanent link

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**Horizons of history:
Space, time, and the future of the past¹**

David Armitage

Big is back across a wide range of historical fields. Many historians are stretching space, to create international, transnational and global histories. Others are expanding time, to pursue Big History, Deep History and the history of the Anthropocene. What explains this broadening of horizons? And what does it mean for the future of history? This article makes a case for history as a discipline of social and political transformation amid crises of global governance, rising inequality, and anthropogenic climate change.

I have been thinking a lot lately about the future of History. I am in the midst of a three-year term (2012–14, 2015–16) as Chair of the Harvard History Department and this has presented a great opportunity to think broadly, not just about the directions my own Department should be going in the next few years, but also about trends in the field, about the meaning of history — as a discipline rather than as a metaphysical force — and about the fate of the humanities more generally.² Unlike the benighted and bumbling head of department in Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim* (1953), who portentously answers his office phone, 'History speaking', I cannot claim to speak with the voice of history. However, I do want to reflect here on some of the purposes of History as an academic discipline.³

¹ Forthcoming in *History Australia*. This article is the revised text of a lecture given in various forms at the University of New South Wales, the Australian National University, Queen's University, Universität Heidelberg, and the University of Queensland, and as the Keith Sinclair Lecture at the University of Auckland.

² In 2012–13, I was a member of the Humanities Working Group at Harvard that produced the report, 'The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future' (31 May 2013): http://artsandhumanities.fas.harvard.edu/files/humanities/files/mapping_the_future_31_may_2013.pdf

³ Here and elsewhere I draw on material from Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Across the world — in the English-speaking parts of it, at least — there is now a much-discussed ‘crisis of the humanities’. The motors of the current crisis, which has local manifestations in different countries, are many and miscellaneous: sharply declining enrolments in our classrooms; the controversial rise of massive open online courses (‘MOOCs’) which threaten to create a hierarchy of institutions and to promote easily quantified subjects at the expense of those that cannot be reduced to machine-readable responses; the shifting boundaries between scientific and non-scientific disciplines which can make humanistic studies seem to some quaint or luxurious; genuine concerns about employability among students and their parents; ideologies of ‘impact’ and ‘relevance’; a creeping instrumentalism among administrators; and the squeezes on public (and private) university revenues that inform them, among other factors.⁴ Battling these challenges, from within and from without, can feel like a struggle against the many-headed Hydra: Herculean (and therefore heroic) but unremitting, because every victory brings with it a new adversary.

These challenges affect History as much as the other humanities subject: as Lynn Hunt has recently noted, ‘history is in crisis and not just one of university budgets’.⁵ Our comparative advantage as historians is perspective: we can see that there have been recurrent crises of the humanities over the past fifty years or more and that this particular crisis is nothing new.⁶ One historian has also shown that some of the panic about shrinking class-sizes in the US is misplaced. If judged from a peak in the 1970s, it can indeed look like the bottom is falling out of the humanities, with the *Wall Street Journal* reporting a drop of almost 50% in the proportion of

⁴ Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin, 2012); Andrew McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education* (London: Pluto Press, 2013); Ben Etherington, ‘Universities and the Block’, *Sydney Review of Books* (23 May 2014): <http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/universities-and-the-block/>.

⁵ Lynn Hunt, *Writing History in the Global Age* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 1.

⁶ See, for example, John Mulvaney, *The Wisdom of ‘Non-Relevance’: The Humanities and Australia’s Cultural Heritage*, Kenneth Myer Lecture 5 (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1994). My thanks to Tom Griffiths for alerting me to Mulvaney’s remarkably prescient lecture.

American students majoring in humanities subjects, from 14% in 1966 to 7.6% in 2010.⁷ The decline appears less shocking if the baseline is 1945 not 1966: then, barely 10% of students majored in humanities subjects, and it was the late 1960s and 1970s, when enrolments boomed, that appear to be the anomaly.⁸ Deeper digging has also revealed a crucial gender dimension to these figures: much of the alleged flight from the humanities in the US has been the movement of women, first into and then out of humanities subjects; the proportion of men taking these subjects has barely changed since 1950.⁹ It is not clear whether these findings would hold true in quite the same way in Australia or the United Kingdom, for instance. What is certain is that the humanities *do* perceive themselves to be embattled and *are* on the defensive, throughout and beyond the English-speaking world; and their methods — particularly, the long-term analytical perspective afforded by History — can help to identify meaningful rather than misplaced causes for concern.

What might be done to snatch History from the bonfire of humanities? History, understood as an inquiry into the past, has been pursued in various forms for over two thousand years; of course, ‘inquiry’ is the etymological meaning of the Greek word from which the term ‘history’ and its analogues in other European languages derive. It therefore long preceded the very recent confining of such modes of understanding into professional disciplines and academic departments, and has a long pedigree within broadly classical systems of education from late Antiquity to the twentieth century. For much of that time, History was more or less

⁷ Jennifer Levitz and Douglas Belkin, ‘Humanities Fall from Favor’, *The Wall Street Journal* (6 June 2013): http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324069104578527642373232184.html?mod=WSJ_hps_LEFTTopStories

⁸ Benjamin Schmidt, ‘Some Long Term Perspective on the “Crisis” in Humanities Enrolment’, *Sapping Attention* (7 June 2013): <http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2013/06/some-long-term-perspective-on-crisis-in.html>

⁹ Benjamin Schmidt, ‘Gender and the Long-Term Decline in Humanities Enrollments’, *Sapping Attention* (26 June 2013): <http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2013/06/gender-and-long-term-decline-in.html>.

practical pursuit, a guide to public life, for rulers, their advisers, and citizens: to provide ‘philosophy teaching by example’, as one classic tag had it, or to be the ‘guide to life’ (*magistra vitae*), as Cicero famously put it.¹⁰ It deployed analysis of the past precisely to shape the future. It is only in the past half-century that History gradually lost its public, future-oriented mission, though there are signs that its vocation — in a more critical, democratic, even radical guise — may be returning.

History’s place in public life remains fragile and uncertain, to the point that historians now occupy very little space in policy debates, whether national, international, or global. This retreat to the margins is partly self-inflicted, partly the unintended consequence of professionalisation, partly the result of more aggressive claims to influence by other academics, especially by our colleagues in Economics.¹¹ But damage done still can be undone. New directions in historical work can help bring historians back into the marketplace of ideas. History is broadening its horizons in space and expanding its horizons in time. Where once historians preferred the microscope, we are reaching again for the telescope; landscapes as well as portraits are increasingly in the historian’s repertoire; the long shot is once more joining the close-up as a major perspective on the past. No other form of humane inquiry is so well equipped to go wide and to go deep at the same time. And no other subject in the humanities — arguably, no other academic discipline — has the capacity to be at once trans-*national* and trans-*temporal*.

‘Transnational’ is now a widespread term of art among historians and other scholars. It has a history going back to the mid-19th century, where its origins can be found in comparative philology: ‘trans-national’ study meant looking for commonalities and connections between discreet national languages. Over the course of the twentieth century, the word had to be repeatedly rediscovered before

¹⁰ (Pseudo-)Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ars Rhetorica*, 376 (attributing the line to Thucydides); Cicero, *De Oratore*, II. 36: ‘Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua voce alia nisi oratoris immortalitati commendatur?’ (‘By what voice other than the orator’s is history—the witness of past times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the guide to life, the herald of antiquity—committed to immortality?’).

¹¹ John Markoff and Verónica Montecinos, ‘The Ubiquitous Rise of Economists’, *Journal of Public Policy* 13 (1993): 37–68.

it settled into academic vocabulary. International lawyers in the 1950s took it up as a word to cover new forms of law (like the regulation of the environment or outer space) that lay beyond state jurisdiction. And humanists and social scientists found it useful yet again in the last twenty years or so, as a term of art for all the ideas, processes and forms of both activity — human and non-human — that do not fit comfortably within the political boundaries of nations or states.¹²

‘Transtemporal’ is a rather less frequently used word.¹³ I have appropriated that term from anatomy, where it means ‘[c]rossing the temples; traversing the temporal lobe of the brain’.¹⁴ In the context of history, it implies crossing time-periods and traversing the conventional segments — often quite short or quite narrow — into which historians conveniently slice up the past. Just as transnational history stresses linkages and comparisons across space, so we might say that transtemporal history deals with such connections across time. Transtemporal history can already be found in the idea of various ‘long’ centuries: the long twentieth century; the long eighteenth century; even the long thirteenth century, are all popular among historians; in the movement to erase the boundary between history and so-called ‘pre-history’; and in the various other species of long-range history — for example, Big History, Deep History, the history of the Anthropocene — I will mention later in this article.

Transnational history rejects the national frame that has structured so much historical writing since it became professionalised in the late nineteenth century;¹⁵ transtemporal history revolts against conventional periodisations, especially those produced on the roughly biological timescales of, say, 20–50 years, that has characterised most historical writing since the 1970s. One captures the experiences of most of humanity more accurately than national history; the other presents a

¹² Pierre-Yves Saunier, ‘Transnational’, in *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, eds. Akira Iriye and Saunier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1047–55.

¹³ David Armitage, ‘What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*’, *History of European Ideas* 38 (2012): 493–507.

¹⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., ‘transtemporal’.

¹⁵ Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

more radical path for history in the future, and a means to bring history back into some of the most pressing debates in the present — debates about global governance, inequality, and the fate of the planet, for example. The ability to be at once trans-national *and* trans-temporal may in fact be key to History's evolutionary ability to survive academic catastrophe. As the editor of the *American Historical Review* recently noted, 'To reflect in some manner on questions of scale, in terms of both time and space, is clearly not new ... But there seems a degree of urgency as well as self-consciousness that informs our interest in this question today that was not present before.'¹⁶ That urgency comes both from within and from outside the historical profession.

* * * * *

History-writing became more than just the pursuit of interested amateurs in the late nineteenth century. It is from this moment that we can speak of a 'historical profession'. And like any new profession, it consciously equipped itself with all the paraphernalia of prestige and exclusivity: in this case, journals, professional associations, systems of gate-keeping, and accreditation mechanisms like the PhD — all of which we still have with us today. More unwittingly, professional historians fitted their inquiries into the most readily available container for them: the nation-state. Professional history was born national and stayed that way, for most of the time, across most of the globe, until very recently.

Like most other social scientists, historians assumed that self-identifying nations, organised politically into states, were the primary objects of historical study. The main tasks for historians of these communities were, accordingly, to narrate how nation-states emerged, how they developed, and how they interacted with one another. Even those historians whose work deliberately crossed the borders of national histories worked along similar lines and reaffirmed those borders. For example, diplomatic historians used national archives to reconstruct relations

¹⁶ Robert A. Schneider, 'How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History', *American Historical Review* 118 (2013): 1432.

among states. Historians of immigration (not emigration) tracked the arrival and assimilation of new peoples into existing states. And imperial historians studied empires as the extensions of national histories. In all these fields, the matter of history concerned stability not mobility, what was fixed but not what was mixed.

In the last twenty years, historians have increasingly questioned the usefulness of these national frameworks for studying the past, moving towards studies they describe variously as international, transnational, comparative, and global. *International* historians often take for granted the existence of a society of states but look beyond state boundaries to map inter-state relationships, from diplomacy and finance to migration and cultural exchanges. *Transnational* historians examine processes, movements, and institutions that overflow territorial boundaries: for example, the environment, organised crime, epidemics, corporations, religions, and international social movements. *Comparative* historians deal with distinct historical subjects — which are often, but not always, nationally defined — in conjunction with each, although not always on the basis of any actual historical connection between their objects of study. And *global* historians treat the history and pre-histories of globalisation, the histories of objects that have become universalised, and the links between sub-global arenas such as the Indian, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans. The family resemblance that links these approaches is the desire to go above or beyond the histories of states defined by nations and of nations bounded by states. Most history, human and otherwise, took place in spaces larger than, or smaller than, the nation-state: to take account of this fact, we need to pay more attention arenas that were larger than nations, unconfined by the political boundaries of states, and connected by transnational linkages and circulations.

Most of the world's population, for most of recorded history, lived not in nation-states but in empires. For a relatively brief period, between the early sixteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of those empires were the outgrowths of confidently national cultures, particularly in Europe and Asia, but most were pre-national or supranational in composition. Oceanic spaces connected elements of many of these empires in the modern period, but maritime arenas such as the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic, and the Pacific also segmented

sovereignties and became cockpits of inter-imperial rivalry.¹⁷ In light of the long history of empire, the eternal world of states posited by modern conceptions of international relations seems fleeting, even marginal. By some estimates a world of true nation-states, detached from empire, emerged only with the zenith of decolonisation, soon to be swept away by the wave of transnationalism that erupted after the end of the Cold War, then the heyday of the state lasted less than a generation, from about 1975 to 1989.¹⁸ All history, before and after, was either pre-national or post-national history.

My own work in recent years has tracked these developments in transnational history. My first book, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (2000), was on the history of empire and its relation to state-formation in Britain and the Atlantic world from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century and argued that the creation of the British Empire and the forging of the British state out of various nations — English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish — were not distinct but conjoined processes. The British state emerged out of the experience of empire as much as the empire was an extension of the state — and both were born amid international rivalries among European powers within Europe itself and in the Americas.¹⁹ My next book, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007), traced the emergence of a new state — or, rather, thirteen new states, the United States of America — from the British Empire itself. That book confronted a fundamental myth of American exceptionalism by showing how the United States was born international and that the Declaration of Independence — that most American of American documents — was transnational in content, in form, and in impact across the two centuries and more since 1776. By focusing on one text and

¹⁷ David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); David Armitage and Alison Bashford, eds., *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁸ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

its transnational fortunes, I was able to begin answering the question, ‘How did our modern world of states emerge from an earlier world of empires?’.²⁰

Most recently, in *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (2013), I took that question further to ask, ‘How did we — all of us in the world — come to imagine that we inhabit a world of states?’.²¹ That feat of collective human imagination may be the single most important shift in political consciousness of the last five hundred years — bigger than the expansion of democracy, the rise of popular sovereignty, the spread of nationalism, or the proliferation of human rights, because each of these other developments depended on the creation of a world of states for its unfolding. It was in the early modern period, roughly between the early seventeenth century and the early nineteenth century, that the foundations of modern international thought were laid down. States, not individuals or corporate entities, were the primary actors in world affairs. These sovereign states operated under conditions of anarchy — that is, self-organisation without any controlling world government or other superior sovereign. Because they controlled who could, and could not, be recognised as a state, they created international organisations — such as the United Nations — to police the actions of member-states of the club, with all others deemed to be rogues, pirates, or failed states. Ideology and myth sustained, and continues to sustain, this self-affirming international community: for example, the myth of a ‘Westphalian’ state-system that allegedly began in 1648.

The historian’s task — and, not least, this historian’s task — has been to puncture some of those myths by asking where they came from, what motives lay behind them, and how they became so central to understanding the international realm. Each had to be invented: the world of states is not a feature of nature. And each arose for quite specific reasons, usually the defence of new or embattled institutions against their competitors and their adversaries. Most are surprisingly recent—the idea that the international realm is ‘Hobbesian’ comes from the 1920s;

²⁰ David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²¹ David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

the myth of the Westphalian state goes back to the early nineteenth century; and the very idea of the 'international' emerged only in the 1780s, for example.

Breaking these myths, and realising how fragile many of our presuppositions about international politics are, can be salutary for questioning some of the assumptions of our political masters: for example, that the individual is necessarily subordinate to the state, that borders are impermeable (and therefore 'immigrants' should be kept beyond them), or that there is such a thing as a 'national' interest which trumps our duties of care for those beyond our frontiers. And, more generally, by seeing our own inherited arrangements as accidental and contingent, we may be in a better position to question them and to imagine alternatives. That is also a distinctive property of transtemporal history, to which I now turn.

* * * * *

Transnational history is a reaction against seeing the past through nation-shaped spectacles. *Transtemporal* history represents a revolt against the equally constraining time-frames within which most historical research and writing has been conducted for most of our lifetimes. I alluded earlier to Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, in which Jim Dixon — a nervous junior lecturer, worried about his professional future — obsesses throughout the book: 'The Economic Influence of the Developments in Shipbuilding Techniques, 1450 to 1485.' 'It was a perfect title', the narrator notes, 'in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems.'²² Yet within a few years of the novel's appearance, an essay on such a broad topic, covering as much as thirty-five years of history, would have been deemed almost recklessly overambitious.

For the best part of two generations (c. 1975-2005), most historians conducted most of their studies on time-scales of between five and fifty years. Thousands of historical monographs, articles, and dissertations testify to the

²² Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim* [1953] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 14–15.

constraint of biological time-spans calibrated more or less — usually less — to the length of a human life. In 1900, the average number of years covered in doctoral dissertations in history in the US was about 75 years; by 1975, it was closer to 30. Only very recently has it rebounded again to between 75 and 100 years.²³ The shibboleths of specialism could be found across the world: a command of archives, sometimes the more obscure, the better; total control over a massively exploding bibliography; and an imperative to reconstruct the past in ever finer detail by using the tools of micro-history and thick description forged by anthropologists before they found their way into the hands of historians.

²³ Benjamin Schmidt, 'What Years Do Historians Write About?', *Sapping Attention* (9 May 2013): <http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2013/05/what-years-do-historians-write-about.html>. My thanks to Ben Schmidt for sharing an updated version of his findings.

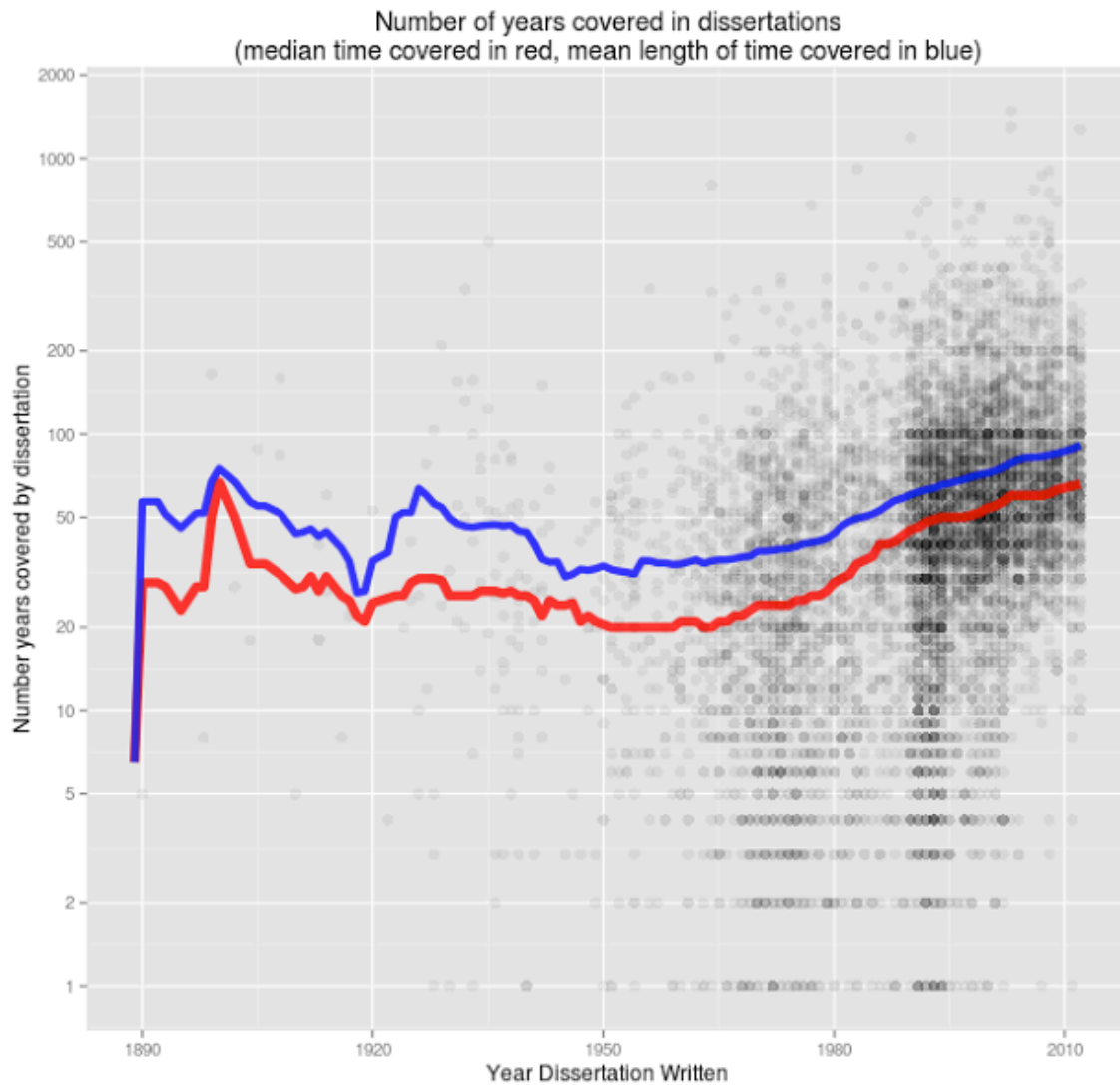


Fig. 1: Number of years covered in History dissertations in the United States, c. 1885–2012.

This contraction of temporal horizons represented a relatively rapid retreat from what in 1958 the great French historian Fernand Braudel had classically called the *longue durée*.²⁴ Braudel was already world-famous for his magisterial study of the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II (1949), one of the most influential historical works of the twentieth century. He organised *The*

²⁴ Fernand Braudel, 'Histoire et Sciences sociales. La longue durée', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales* 13 (1958): 725–53.

Mediterranean according to three different time-scales, told in succession as the book unfolded: 'a quasi-immobile history' (*une histoire quasi-immobile*) of human beings in their physical environment over geological epochs; a 'gently-paced' (*lentement rythmée*) story of states, societies, and civilisations over centuries, even millennia; and a more traditional history of events (*l'histoire événementielle*), treating what he called those 'brief, rapid, nervous oscillations', events.²⁵ The allegedly unchanging landscape; patterns of urban settlement; the eternal regimes of agriculture: all these were aspects of the *longue durée* as he would term it ten years later. Braudel's masterpiece was mostly written while he was in German prison-camps from 1940-45: as he later admitted, his reflections on the *longue durée* were in part an attempt to escape the rhythms of camp life and to bring hope by taking a longer perspective—hence, paradoxically, his frequent use of the imagery of imprisonment in his accounts of the *longue durée*.²⁶

When Braudel explicitly launched the term *longue durée* in 1958, he was battling a different enemy, an earlier product of 'a general crisis of the human sciences', as he put it. The nature of the crisis was in some ways familiar: an explosion of knowledge, including a proliferation of data; a general anxiety about disciplinary boundaries; a failure of cooperation between researchers in adjacent fields; and the stifling grip of what he called 'a retrograde, insidious humanism'. Braudel lamented that the other human sciences had overlooked the distinctive contribution of history to solving the crisis, a solution that went to the heart of the social reality that was the focus of all humane inquiry: 'this opposition ... between the moment and slowly unfolding time'. Between these two poles lay the conventional time-scales used in narrative history and by social and economic historians: spans of ten, twenty, fifty years at most. Histories of crises and cycles along these lines obscured the deeper regularities and continuities underlying the processes of change, Braudel believed. It was essential, he argued, to move to a

²⁵ Fernand Braudel, 'Préface' (1946), in Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949), xiii.

²⁶ Peter Schöttler, 'Fernand Braudel als Kriegsgefangener in Deutschland', in Fernand Braudel, *Geschichte als Schlüssel zur Welt. Vorlesungen in Deutscher Kriegsgefangenschaft 1941*, ed. Schöttler (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2013), 187–211.

different temporal horizon, a history measured in hundreds, even thousands of years: history on a long, sometimes very long, duration (*l'histoire du longue, même de très longue durée*).²⁷

Braudel's motives for promoting the *longue durée* were as much institutional as intellectual. He had just assumed the editorship of France's leading historical journal, *Annales*, and the presidency of one of its leading intellectual institutions, the VI^e Section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris.²⁸ From these lofty pinnacles of French academic life, had to justify the primacy of history among the other social sciences, particularly economics and anthropology. In this competitive context, where prestige and funding were at stake as much as professional pride, the historians' *longue durée* was the alternative to mathematics as the key to integrating the human sciences.

Braudel ranged *l'histoire événementielle* against the *longue durée* not because such history could only treat the ephemeral—what he famously called the 'spume' and 'fireflies' of history — but because it was a history too closely tied to events. In this respect, it was like the work of contemporary economists who, he charged, had harnessed their work to current affairs and to the short-term imperatives of governance. Such a myopic form of historical understanding, tethered to power and focused on the present, evaded explanation, and was allergic to theory: in Braudel's view, it lacked both critical distance and intellectual substance. This agenda also dovetailed neatly with the rise of futurology — the forward-looking counterpart to the *longue durée* — on both sides of the Atlantic in the aftermath of World War Two. The two agendas were closely intertwined, a long past giving substance to an equally long future.²⁹ In this context, it was no coincidence that the very term 'long-range' had migrated from ballistics (think of long-range weapons), to futurology (think of long-range weather forecasting) and from there to history (the *longue durée*).

²⁷ Braudel, 'Histoire et Sciences sociales'.

²⁸ Giuliana Gemelli, *Fernand Braudel e l'Europa universale* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), 246–300.

²⁹ Jenny Andersson, 'The Great Future Debate and the Struggle for the World', *American Historical Review* 117 (2012): 1417–18.

Within barely twenty years, across most of the historical profession globally, there was a general contraction of temporal horizons. As we have seen, by 1975 the average time-span covered by a doctoral dissertation in History in the United States was about thirty years: around 1900, at the birth of professional history, it had been a hundred years. Some of the foundational documents of the American historical profession had been even more ambitious: for example, Frederick Jackson Turner's study of trading-posts across the course of North American history or W. E. B. Du Bois's work on the suppression of the African slave-trade, 1638–1870, both from the 1890s.³⁰ Across the course of the twentieth century, all of the newly-professionalising disciplines — humanistic and natural scientific — were anxious about the dangers of over-specialisation: as one sign of that, we can note the explosion of uses of the phrase 'knowing more and more about less and less' between the 1920s and the 1940s.



Fig. 2: Usage of 'more and more about less [and less]', 1900–90: Google Ngram viewer.

But it was only in the 1980s—that is, after the retreat from the *longue durée*—that such worries became widespread in the historical community. In his 1981 Presidential address to the American Historical Association the towering American

³⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin: A Study of the Trading Post as an Institution* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1891); W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the United States' (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 1895); Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1896).

historian observed that ‘The Challenge of Modern Historiography’ was ‘to bring order into large areas of history and thus to reintroduce ... [it] to a wider reading public, through synthetic works, narrative in structure, on major themes’ because ‘Historical inquiries are ramifying in a hundred directions at once, and there is no coordination among them’ Shortly afterwards, in 1985, another former AHA President, the French historian R. R. Palmer, complained of his own field, ‘Specialization has become extreme ... it is hard to see what such specialization contributes to the education of the young or the enlightenment of the public’. And two years later, in 1987, the young British historian David Cannadine assailed the ‘cult of professionalism’ that meant ‘more and more academic historians were writing more and more academic history that fewer and fewer people were actually reading’. The result ‘was that all too often, the role of the historian as public teacher was effectively destroyed’.³¹ Professionalisation had led to marginalisation. Historians were increasingly cut off from non-specialist readers as they talked only to one another about ever narrower topics studied on ever shorter time-scales.

The explanations for this retreat from the public sphere and fear of long-term history were many: the turn towards ‘thick description’ imported from anthropology; the rise of micro-history with its concentration of specific events, peculiar individuals, and intractable documents; the ‘scepticism towards grand narratives’ that famously defined post-modernism; the move of many adjacent disciplines from holism and synthesis to disaggregation and analysis (think of the rise of microeconomics or analytic philosophy, for instance); and a more general orientation towards the immediate, the present, the here and now all contributed to the centrifugal forces working against longer-term perspectives and the triumph of the short *durée*.³² The contraction of temporal horizons centrally defined what the

³¹ Bernard Bailyn, ‘The Challenge of Modern Historiography’, *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 2, 4, 7–8; R. R. Palmer, ‘A Century of French History in America’, *French Historical Studies* 14 (1985): 173–4; David Cannadine, ‘British History: Past, Present—And Future?’, *Past and Present* 116 (August 1987): 176, 177.

³² Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 577–92; Jean-

American intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers has called this 'Age of Fracture': 'In the middle of the twentieth century', he wrote, 'history's massive, inescapable, larger-than-life presence had weighed down social discourse. To talk seriously was to talk of the long, large-scale movements of time'. By the 1980s, modernisation theory, Marxism, 'theories of long-term economic development and cultural lag, the inexorabilities of the business cycle and the historians' *longue durée*', had all been replaced by a foreshortened sense of time focused on one brief moment: the here and now of the immediate present.³³

The retreat to the short *durée* was not confined to social history, or indeed to the American historical profession. At around the same moment, in my own field of intellectual history, the Cambridge historian Quentin Skinner was leading a charge among intellectual historians against various long-range tendencies in the field — most notably, Arthur Lovejoy's 'history of ideas' stretching over thousands of years and the canonical approach to 'Great Books' by which political theory was generally taught — in favour of ever tighter rhetorical and temporal contextualisation. The contextualism of the so-called Cambridge School thereafter focused almost exclusively on the synchronic and the short-term settings for arguments treated as moves in precisely orchestrated language-games or as specific speech-acts not as instantiations of timeless ideas or enduring concepts. The contextualists' original enemies were Marx, Namier, and Lovejoy, but their efforts were construed as an assault on anachronism, abstraction, and grand theory more generally. Skinner himself tried in 1985 to promote 'the return of grand theory' in the human sciences but his enterprise was beset by the paradox that many of the thinkers who inspired or represented this *revanche* — among them, Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn, and Michel Foucault — expressed 'a willingness to emphasize the local and the contingent ... and a correspondingly strong dislike ... of all overarching

François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979), 7.

³³ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 255.

theories and singular schemes of explanation'.³⁴ Reports in the 1980s of the return of grand theory were therefore exaggerated. Far from returning, it was retreating into the twilight like Minerva's owl.

Longue-durée history never disappeared entirely from the publishing lists of university presses on both sides of the Atlantic. However the combination of archival mastery, micro-history and an emphasis on contingency and context, powered by a suspicion of grand narratives, a hostility to whiggish teleologies, and an ever-advancing anti-essentialism, determined an increasing focus on the synchronic and the short-term. But for every action there is a reaction and, by the process of generational revolt and questioning of received wisdom, in turn generated a return to the *longue durée*. Questions of 'world history' and 'big history' widened the scope of narrative and began to incorporate an environmentally-minded retelling of history, in which human events were contextualised against a longer life of natural processes. Technological factors have also begun to change the possibilities for historical research. Historians now have larger numbers of digitised and electronic archives at their disposal and more tools to analyse them: we are custodians of big data, and the methods of digital history can empower even junior scholars to attempt projects of a scope undreamed of — and actively discouraged by — historians of recent decades. Both of these factors have more recently begun to drive historians to consider longer and longer time periods based on bigger and bigger sets of data.

In the last decade, evidence for the return of the *longue durée* can be found across the intellectual landscape. A Latin Americanist notes of his field that 'it became unfashionable to posit theories about ... historical trajectories over the very long-run', but change is now in the air: 'Now the *longue durée* is back'. A European cultural historian tells his colleagues at a conference, 'all of us are ... invested, more or less explicitly, in a *longue durée* of sexuality'. And a professor of American Studies remarks of her discipline, 'Anyone in literary studies who has looked recently at

³⁴ Quentin Skinner, 'Introduction: The Return of Grand Theory', in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 12.

titles of books, conferences, research clusters, and even syllabi across the field cannot have missed two key words ... that are doing substantial periodizing duty for literary and cultural criticism': one is geographical (the Atlantic world), the other 'a chronological unit, the *longue durée*'.³⁵ Even a cursory scan of recent arrivals on the history bookshelves turns up a host of long-range histories, of around-the-world travel over 500 years; of the first 3000 years of Christianity; of genocide 'from Sparta to Darfur' and guerrilla warfare 'from ancient times to the present'; of the very 'shape' of human history over the last 15,000 years; and of a host of similar grand topics directed to wide reading publics.³⁶

My own current research, on the history of ideas of civil war, spans over two thousand years, from Rome to the present.³⁷ My aim is to show how contemporary definitions of civil war necessarily breed conflict about conflict because they embody a confused and often contested set of conceptions whose roots, in some cases, go back to Roman law. Civil war resists definition because it is both evaluative and descriptive: it cannot be abstracted — despite distinguished attempts to do so — but must be historicised. It is also an indispensable item in our political vocabulary, yet one whose application to events is never without controversy. This is in part because the term 'civil war' occurs in both technical discourses and non-expert speech: any one of us might think we know what civil war is when we see it

³⁵ Jeremy Adelman, 'Latin American *Longues Durées*', *Latin American Research Review* 39 (2004): 224; Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Sexuality and the Transformation of Culture: The *Longue Durée*', *Sexualities* 12, 4 (2009): 418; Susan Gillman, 'Oceans of *Longues Durées*', *PMLA* 127 (2012): 328.

³⁶ Joyce E. Chaplin, *Round About the Earth: Circumnavigation from Magellan to Orbit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Penguin, 2009); David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Liveright, 2012); Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); Morris, *The Measure of Civilization: How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

³⁷ David Armitage, *Civil War: A History in Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).

(or have it reported to us), but there are multiple communities of experts, such as international lawyers, political scientists and politicians themselves, who will beg to differ. Think of the discussions over whether or not the violence in Iraq rose to the level of ‘civil war’ (with consequences for the intervention, or non-intervention, of powers like the United States). And think of the more recent debate about whether or not the death-toll in Syria approximated to the condition of civil war — a discussion fraught with anxiety for Syrians themselves, because on it depended the provision of aid and support by the International Committee of the Red Cross.³⁸

Civil war has always been an essentially contested concept and cannot be precisely contained. It is therefore a prime suspect for long-range intellectual history aimed at unsettling the certainties of policy-makers and journalists by adding complexity and historical depth to current debates. But it is only one such object — a host of other transtemporal intellectual histories are emerging now, of occupation and empire, of common sense and genius, of ambition and disobedience.³⁹ At least one historical field — intellectual history, or the history of ideas — is overcoming its resistance to the *longue durée*, and others are already following.⁴⁰

Indeed, big is back across a spectrum of new and revived modes of historical writing. Grandest of all is ‘Big History’, an account of the past stretching back to the

³⁸ ‘Syria in Civil War, Red Cross Says’, *BBC News, Middle East* (15 July 2012): <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18849362>; ‘Internal Conflicts or Other Situations of Violence – What is the Difference for Victims?’, International Committee of the Red Cross, Resource Centre (12 December 2012): <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/2012/12-10-niac-non-international-armed-conflict.htm>.

³⁹ Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire, 1500–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); William Cary King, *Ambition, a History: From Virtue to Vice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Raffaele Laudani, *Disobedience in Western Political Thought: A Genealogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Darrin M. McMahon, ‘The Return of the History of Ideas?’, in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, eds. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13–31.

origins of the universe itself. More modest in scope, because it includes only the human past, is the still remarkably expansive 'Deep History' which spans some 40,000 years and deliberately breaks through the entrenched boundary between 'history' and 'pre-history'. And more focused still, yet with perhaps the most immediate resonance for present concerns, is the history of the Anthropocene, the period in which human beings have comprised a collective actor powerful enough to affect the environment on a planetary scale.⁴¹ The time-scales of these movements are, respectively, cosmological, archaeological, and climatological: each represents a novel expansion of historical perspectives, and each operates on horizons longer — usually much longer — than a generation, a human lifetime, or the other roughly biological time-spans that have defined most recent historical writing.

The longer perspectives afforded by this new, enlarged view of history have obvious relevance to our current situation. Since the Second World War, planning horizons and budget-cycles around the globe had shrunk even more drastically than the time-scales of historians. Electoral cycles and models drawn originally from military strategy and economic forecasting narrowed the focus of policy-makers and NGOs to periods of between one and five years. It is little wonder, then, that global governance is in collapse, that inequality within countries is rising (even as the inequalities between them are declining), or that climate change is almost certainly already beyond human remedy.

All these crises have deep roots, stretching back respectively to the mid-twentieth century (and the rise of modern international institutions), the late nineteenth century (and the acceleration of capitalism), or the late eighteenth century (with the beginnings of the Anthropocene), at a minimum. Yet history is not, as some economists might tell us, reducible to path-dependency. The future need

⁴¹ David Christian, 'The Longest *Durée*: A History of the Last 15 Billion Years', *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* 59–60 (August–November 1989): 27–36; Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197–222; Alison Bashford, 'The Anthropocene is Modern History: Reflections on Climate and Australian Deep Time', *Australian Historical Studies* 44 (2013), 341–9.

not run in the ruts of the past. It is possible to jump the tracks and take a new direction, just as it is feasible to go back through the past to discover paths not taken. Only by scaling our inquiries over so many decades, centuries, or even millennia, can we hope to understand the genesis of our present discontents. And only by delving deep into the past can we hope to project ourselves imaginatively any meaningful distance into the future: for, as Winston Churchill once said, ‘the longer you can look back, the further you can look forward’.⁴²

For these reasons, the future of the past is in the hands of historians. Armed with both transnational and transtemporal perspectives, historians can be guardians against parochial perspectives and endemic short-termism. Once called upon to offer their advice on political development and land-reform, the creation of the welfare state and post-conflict settlement, historians, along with other humanists, effectively ceded the public arena, nationally as well as globally, to the economists and occasionally to lawyers and political scientists. (When was the last time a historian wrote a regular column for the *New York Times* or being seconded to Downing Street or the White House from their academic post, let alone consulting for the World Bank or advising the UN Secretary-General?) It may be little wonder, then, that we have a crisis of global governance, that we are all that the mercy of underregulated financial markets and that anthropogenic climate change threatens our seas and cities, our food-supplies and water-sources, political stability and the survival of species, to mention just a few foreseeable but increasingly unavoidable consequences. To put these challenges in perspective, and to combat the short-termism of our time, we urgently need the wide-angle, long-range views that only historians can provide.

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⁴² Winston Churchill, toast to the Royal College of Physicians (2 March 1944): ‘Prime Minister Among the Physicians’, *The Lancet* 243, 6289 (11 March 1944): 344.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Saliha Belmessous (UNSW), Amitava Chowdhury (Queen's), Bronwen Douglas (ANU), Barbara Mittler (Heidelberg), Knox Peden (Queensland) and Jonathan Scott (Auckland) for invitations to speak at their respective institutions, Marilyn Lake for encouraging publication of the text in *History Australia*, and Alex Cook and Frank Bongiorno for their editorial assistance with the final version.

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